

Tamalpais district cuts \$2 million, warns of layoffs ahead

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Faced with cuts to state funding and local property taxes, the Tamalpais Union High School District board slashed more than \$2 million from its \$55 million budget this week, reducing the number of working days for teachers, administrators and other employees.

The change won't have a noticeable impact on students, who will continue to attend school for 180 days a year. But it will cut as few as two and as many as 32 paid days from the calendars of district employees, saving the district an estimated \$489,000.

"It's an issue for management, where we'll have to figure out how to do the same amount - and in many cases, more work - within a shorter work year, and while we're also reducing management positions," said Superintendent Laurie Kimbrel.

In addition, school officials have warned that layoffs may be ahead - but that the district has no intention of cutting its teachers. That's left administrative assistants, maintenance workers, groundskeepers and other members of the Tam district's classified staff waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I think more than anything we don't feel like we've been heard or appreciated by our management," said Lynn Barnes, school secretary at Tamiscal High School. "We're feeling there's a disparity with these budget cuts, that they're coming off the backs of classified workers."

School officials say they're doing everything they can to avoid layoffs. Cuts approved unanimously by the board Tuesday included \$1.41 million from the district's adult education department; elimination of summer school in 2011 at a savings of \$265,000; temporary suspension of a portfolio assessment requirement for sophomores; and cutting the stipend members of the Board of Trustees receive by half.

Yet Kimbrel said some staff reductions are inevitable.

"Over the course of three years, we are cutting more than \$7 million from our budget," Kimbrel said. "It's gut-wrenching. It's heartbreaking. But there's simply no way to cut that amount out of a \$55 million budget without impacting personnel. We value every one of our employees, but we've got to balance the budget."

The high school district has suffered from a fall in local property tax revenues, which make up roughly three-quarters of the district's budget. Until recently, those tax revenues rose by an average of 8 percent each year, bringing an additional \$2 million to \$3 million to the district. But revenues rose by only 3.3 percent this year - and could fall by 0.25 percent next year, which would cut \$100,000 from the budget.

And while the district does not depend on the state for the majority of its income, the state's "fair share" program cut \$2.6 million from special program funds - about \$1 million more than district officials had expected.

While acknowledging the crisis, classified union president Bill Bridges argued that school officials have refused to entertain other budget-cutting options, such as drawing from the district's rainy day fund.

"We're hearing the word 'collaborative' thrown out a lot, but it's not being practiced," said Bridges, president of California School Employees Association Tamalpais Chapter 549. "Shared decision-making is not what it used to be."

Officials say they need to maintain cash reserves of at least twice the amount of money the district would normally receive in property tax income in case one or more of the district's revenue sources - such as its annual parcel tax - disappears, turning a financial crisis into a catastrophe.

"We need to be very protective of the reserves because of the continued uncertainty in the state's economic picture," said Trustee John Wright.

District officials plan to identify the classified positions chosen for elimination by May 7; the board will vote on that recommendation at its May 11 meeting. Those reductions in force will not become final until the district budget does, however, and officials still hold out hope that the next revision to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed state budget will prove to be a pleasant surprise.

"Should anything turn out to be better than anticipated, we will go back and add things back in," Kimbrel said.

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